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# The Role Of Solar Eclipses In Religion

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By Tom Gjelten

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## Transcript

Throughout human history, solar eclipses have been seen as having great religious significance, often as omens or signs of divine warning or punishment. Major and minor religions alike have their own understandings.

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KELLY MCEVERS, HOST:

Our fascination with solar eclipses like the one coming up Monday is thousands of years old. It was thought that the sudden disappearance of the Sun was one of those mysteries that only the gods could explain. Science eventually provided the answers, but for religious believers, a solar eclipse remains an occasion of special significance. Here's NPR's Tom Gjelten.

TOM GJELTEN, BYLINE: Imagine you're a Plains Indian on a perfect summer day, hunting buffalo under a cloudless prairie sky. Suddenly, for no reason, the sun begins to go dark.

ANTHONY AVENI: You go through a twilight like you've never seen. You see shadows like you've never seen. You see colors like you've never seen. And then you see what looks like a hole in the sky.

GJELTEN: And you're terrified. Anthony Aveni is a professor of astronomy and anthropology at Colgate University. In his new book, "In The Shadow Of The Moon," Aveni tell stories of how cultures through the ages have related to solar eclipses. In some pre-modern societies, the sun was itself seen as a living thing. During a solar eclipse, some people figured the sun was being eaten and needed to be alerted to the danger it faced.

AVENI: People banging pans and making noise and pinching their dogs to make them howl at the eclipse. And an anthropologist asked them about this and said, you know, are you chasing away the demons with your noise? And one responded, said, no, we're not chasing away the demons. We're trying to get the sun's attention.

GJELTEN: Those who believed in one God, like the Jews, didn't see the sun as a cosmic player, but a solar eclipse scared them as well. They turned to their rabbis for guidance. Jeremy Brown has studied ancient rabbinic teachings recorded as the Talmud.

JEREMY BROWN: In Judaism, human actions have consequences. And so when the rabbis in the Talmud experienced the darkness of a solar eclipse, they thought it was a curse and asked what could have led to this frightening event.

GJELTEN: Some seemingly random explanations appear in the Talmud, among them that an eclipse could follow from a chief rabbi not being properly eulogised at his death. Once it became clear an eclipse could be predicted, of course it was

harder to see it as a divine response to some human conduct. And yet the notion that an eclipse is a sign from God has persisted in some religious circles. A popular Australian pastor, Steve Cioccolanti, posted a lecture on his YouTube channel recently in which he said next week's solar eclipse may portend something bad happening in America.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

STEVE CIOCCOLANTI: I think that a major earthquake or a plague or meteorite strikes are being foretold. Is that what I'm prophesying - no. I'm just saying that's entirely possible.

GJELTEN: Even in faith traditions that now fully accept the science, a solar eclipse remains an occasion that highlights the wonders of the universe and our small place in it. In a book and on his website Talmudology, Jeremy Brown has written about Jewish understandings of solar eclipses.

BROWN: Today, an eclipse is no longer seen as a threat, as an omen but as something to be celebrated. There is a consensus of opinion amongst the rabbis that an eclipse should be witnessed with joy and happiness and appropriate psalms and blessings.

GJELTEN: Brown and his family are heading to Charleston, S.C., for an eclipse-viewing event at a synagogue. But a total solar eclipse is momentous to everyone. The National Convention of American Atheists will also be in Charleston, hosting a viewing of their own. Tom Gjelten, NPR News.

(SOUNDBITE OF THE DIP'S "WON'T BE COMING BACK")

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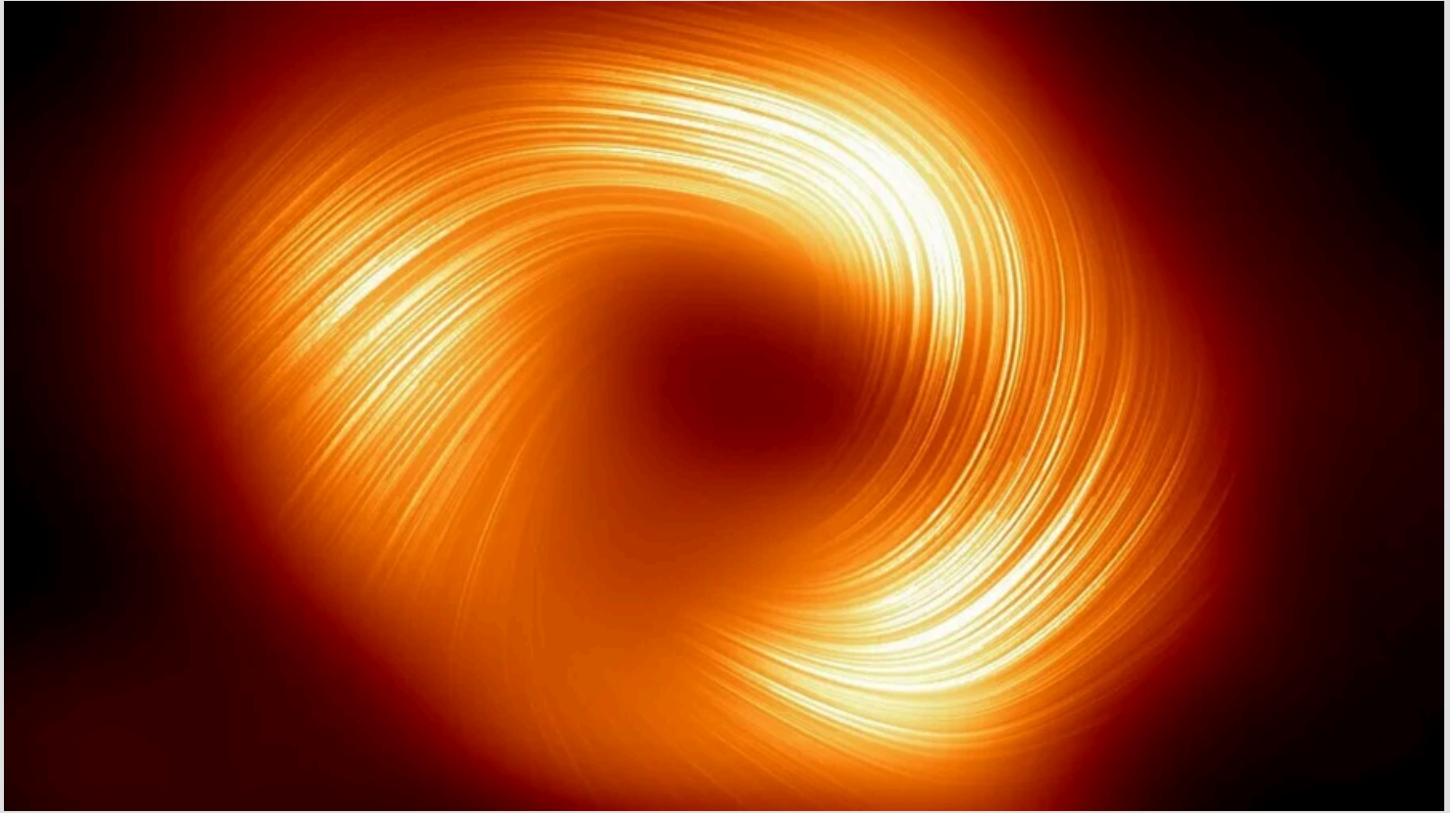
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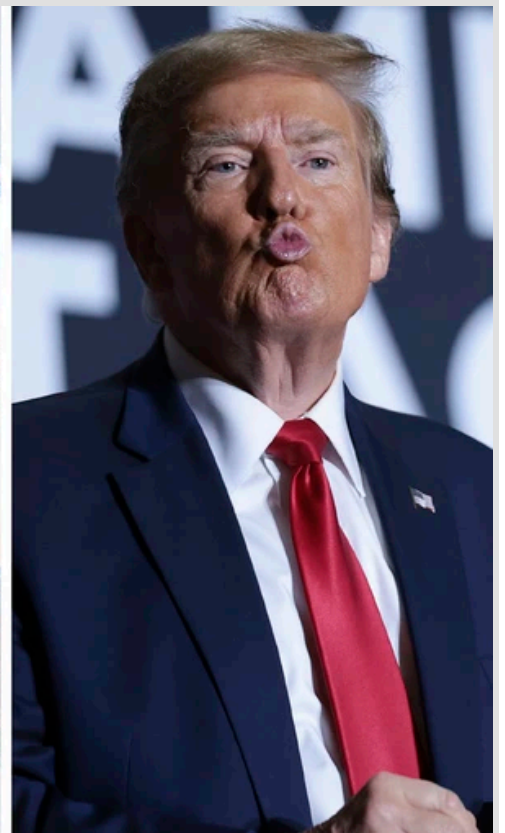
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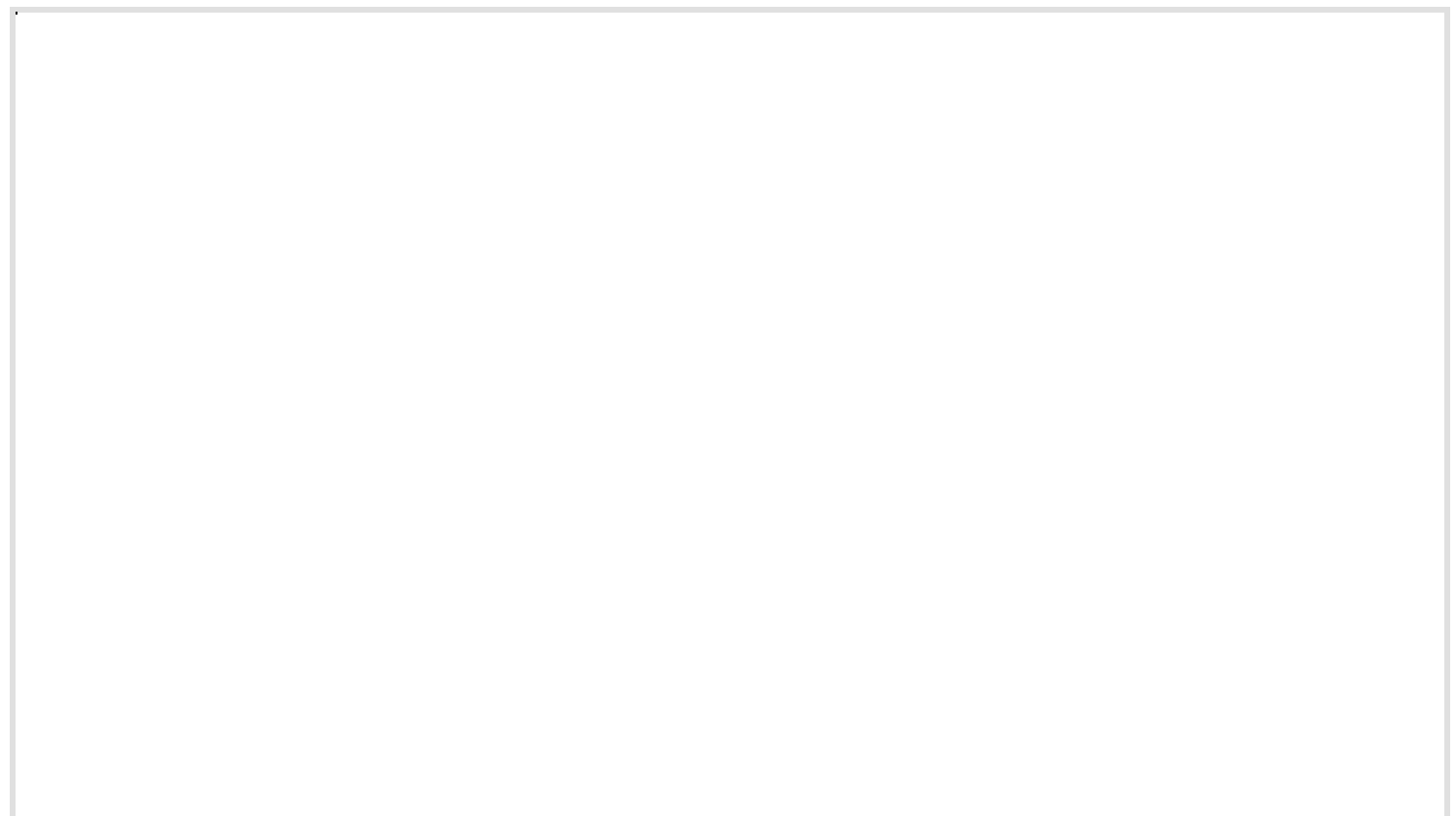
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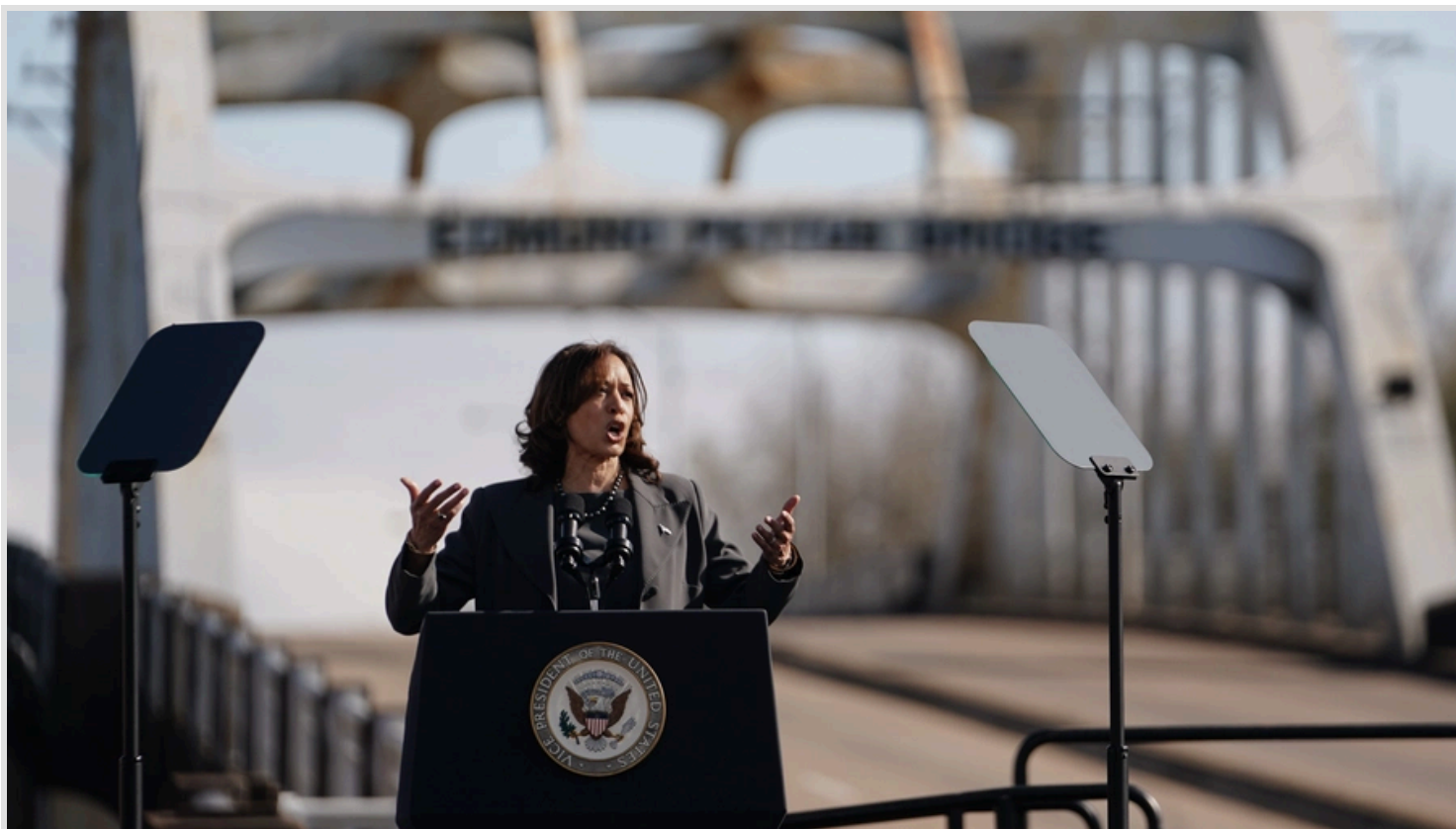
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